

Man on a Mission: Researcher Profile, Dr Onno Purbo



Dr Onno Purbo

2003-11-17

Nadine Robitaille

“I’m producing knowledge producers who, it is hoped, will produce knowledge producers themselves.”

Dr Onno Purbo has dedicated his life to promoting the dissemination of knowledge through information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Indonesia, both as a professor at Bandung’s Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB) and as the author of nearly 1000 articles and close to 40 books. It’s all part of a large plan to empower people through ICTs, and to foster a movement that will see information and know-how being shared through the Internet throughout the geographically-fragmented nation.

Purbo’s enthusiasm, dedication, knowledge, and energy make him the perfect candidate for the task of changing the way a nation shares information. His method is twofold: communicate with people through public speaking, articles, and books; and educate others to do the same.

Until five years ago, Purbo taught at ITB, striving to help his students become analytical thinkers and writers who could help shape Indonesia’s future. His students were required to produce articles and books of their own, therefore ensuring that written Indonesian-language material was being made available. Something, says Purbo, that is far too rarely done. “We don’t have enough knowledge written in Bahasa Indonesia. We need to disseminate the knowledge to people in the community. So we need to educate people on what you can do with ICTs, how to set up a telecentre, how to set up a proxy server, in simple language.”

It is this desire to educate the public that led Purbo to resign from ITB in 2000 to devote all his energy to promoting ICTs in Indonesia. Usually, he travels to two or three cities a week to give seminars on the feasibility of building infrastructure and to provide training. Most of his [written materials](#) can be easily accessed on the Internet.

While people are very appreciative and receptive to Dr Purbo’s work, the Indonesian government has been reluctant to do anything concerning the new technology, says Purbo. “For years I’ve been working to get the government to promote rather than discourage the diffusion of new

technologies.” The problem is that, lacking land connections, people must use Wireless Fidelity — or “wi-fi” — Internet connections, which depend on radio waves. And while computers, antennas, and other physical equipment can be legally purchased by communities, radio frequencies fall into a gray area of regulation.

Despite the fact that some people have been arrested and many have had their equipment seized, people are willing to run that risk to get the information they want and need. Demand for this service is so high that people will often sell a few heads of livestock or part of their land to pay for the transmitters, which have a range of only a few kilometres.

“I am promoting a movement within society, so that all individuals can build and run their own infrastructure, for their own purposes. Built by the people, for the people,” says Purbo. “There are 2000 of us, you cannot stop everyone.”

Purbo’s work has long been successful at the community level — he credits the movement for most of the four million Indonesians now connected to the Internet. Now, after 10 years of advocacy, Purbo is seeing results at the government level as well. A recent meeting with government officials led the Ministry of Telecommunications to begin drafting an Act for wi-fi regulation, which Purbo describes as “the biggest milestone” for him and others doing his type of work.

Currently, Purbo is a Research Fellow with the [ICTs for Development \(ICT4D\)](#) program area of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), meeting policymakers in developing countries to discuss new ICTs. In the coming months, Purbo will visit numerous countries in the hopes of selling the idea of ICTs as a tool for development, and wi-fi as an inexpensive technology.

Bolstered by his success in Indonesia, Purbo hopes that other governments will also be receptive. “It now seems that I have significant ammunition to talk to governments about how to shape a country’s approach to new technology,” he says. “The message we’ve been delivering for years is finally being received, but we still have a long way to go.”

In early 2004, IDRC is planning to publish two English-language technical manuals written by Onno Purbo. “For years Onno has been receiving emails from people all over the world who want to have material in English about his expertise,” says Nancy Smyth, Senior Program Specialist at IDRC. “We hope that these books will fill that need.”

Nadine Robitaille is a writer in IDRC’s Communications Division.

For more information:

Dr Onno Purbo, c/o Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), IDRC, PO Box 8500, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3H9; Phone: (613) 236-6163; Email: onno@indo.net.id